

Title: Faith that Confidently Faces Adversity

Subtitle: Humility, love, and faith empower us for service where there is no room to boast.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/yCcmsDeNzOk>

Our Gospel today occurs when Jesus is journeying towards Jerusalem, and the closer he gets to his destination, the more opposition he experiences.

None of us are immune to conflict. It is seen and experienced in every corner of our culture, from the seats of political power and party loyalties to our own context in the Anglican communion. For example, this past summer, the Lambeth conference revealed a great deal of division over its definition of marriage.

Such conflicts are emotionally loaded and profoundly affect us all. They challenge our faith and, if we are not careful, can cause us to withdraw. But they can also be an irritant that motivates us to grow stronger. Fortunately, our readings today give clues on how to move forward in this direction.

When the disciples experienced the challenges of following Christ as conflict arose, they asked, “***Lord, increase our faith.***”¹ In response, Jesus declares, “***If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.***” A mulberry tree has deep roots; moving it is no easy task.

When my boys were young, their favorite bedtime story was the one that featured king David as a young boy as he faced Goliath’s massive size and overwhelming strength.

We, too, face giants in the forces, situations, and temptations surrounding us. Sometimes, we may feel hopelessly outmanned.

¹ Luke 17:5

In those times, we need reassurance and confirmation from others who have gone before us.

Habakkuk, in our Old Testament reading, faced overwhelming difficulties as he saw his country disintegrate, which, by the way, was part of God's judgment for their apostasy. So then, as he prayed, he said, ***"I will wait to see what the LORD says and how he will answer my complaint."***²

If a person has a real relationship with God, one that's vital and authentic, you don't have to pretend everything is OK when it is not. In Habakkuk's case, his faith allowed him to speak to God about his questions, concerns, and fears. Yet, amid life's stresses and strains, he takes hold of a vision God gives him. It is a vision that believes God has a plan even when things seem to be falling apart.

Therefore, God told him, ***"Write the vision; make it plain ... the vision is for an appointed time, it shall speak, it will not lie. Therefore, though it tarries, wait for it because it shall come."***³

So, despite all opposition, remember, ***"The righteous will live by their faith."***⁴ Such "faith" is a loving trust in God and his promises, regardless of tribulations that come our way.

It is a vision that believes God is always present, always available, and concerned with every detail of your life. When you realize this, you spontaneously start praying before acting, making time to read, reflect, and allow God to speak to you through his word. There is an openness to change and be changed. It starts with thoughts such as, "You know, the more I think about this, the more I think God may be saying,"... and so on. Each of us can humbly serve God right where we live with

² Habakkuk 2:1

³ Habakkuk 2:3

⁴ Habakkuk 2:4

the gifts we have been given. But it takes openness, humility, and faith.

This is the faith Paul speaks about when he writes to his beloved Timothy, knowing the difficulties he faced as he struggled with opposition, persecution, and false teachers. The context reveals that Paul was in prison due to his courage and faith in proclaiming the Gospel. He opens his letter by recalling Timothy's tears and the close relationship they enjoyed, and how he longed to see him again. He was reminded of Timothy's ***“sincere faith, a faith that lived first in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice and now, he asserts, lives in (him).”***⁵

Yet, such faith could not guard him against facing dangerous foes, which confronted him from outside and inside the church. On the outside were unbelievers of every stripe. On the inside were false teachers who wanted to make the difficulty of living the Christian life easy and philosophically acceptable. Amid this opposition, Paul affirms, ***“God has not given us a Spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power, love, and self-discipline.”***⁶ This power does not deny the presence of fear. But it gives us the strength and courage to act against our fears as we face hostility.

Timothy saw firsthand how Paul was treated and imprisoned for the Gospel. But Paul urged him ***“to join with me in suffering for the Gospel by the power of God.”***⁷ Admittedly, this was a daunting task, but it is one from which he did not shy away. Thankfully, we have many other examples of those who have run the race before us.

St. Francis, whose feast day is celebrated this week on October 4th, is one who suffered rejection and considered it an

⁵ 2 Timothy 1:5

⁶ 2 Timothy 1:7

⁷ 2 Timothy 1:8

honor. He is the patron saint of those who care for all of God's creation. Our opening hymn today, "*All creatures of our God and king,*"⁸ was inspired by one of the poems Francis wrote.

The course of Francis' life was profoundly changed on a pilgrimage to Rome when he saw a beggar outside of St. Peter's Church. The Holy Spirit moved him to trade places with the beggar. Francis exchanged clothes with a beggar and then spent the day begging for alms. That experience of being poor shook Francis to the core. As a result, he cut himself off from the opulent lifestyle of his father, a textile merchant, and he sought a radically simple life that was more in tune with God and nature.

Francis' humble approach to the life of Christian service fits well with Jesus' words today, especially when the slave has done all that he was ordered to do and then says, "***We are worthless servants; we have only done what was our duty!***"⁹

Such devotion results from the Spirit of power, love, and self-discipline that Paul describes to Timothy. This kind of humble faith works by love and is perfected by simple acts of obedience. Then when we have done all we can to live faithfully, we realize that all the glory and all the honor belong to God alone. We owe everything to him through Jesus Christ, "***who equips us with everything good for doing his will, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.***"¹⁰

⁸ The Church Hymnal, 1982, #400, Words attributed to Saint Francis (1182-1226)

⁹ Luke 17:10

¹⁰ Hebrews 13:21